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ADDRESS BY SPEAKER ROB VESCOVO

Thank you. To our returning members, welcome back. And to our new members, congratulations!

As I stand here today as your Speaker, I am deeply humbled and incredibly grateful. Just as our constituents place their trust in us to serve as their voice in this building, you have placed your trust in me to serve you and to help you do what is best for your districts, and for our state. This is a duty I will never take for granted and you have my sincere thanks for your support.

Before I go on, let me take a few moments to thank some very important people in my life. At the top of that list is my beautiful wife, Amanda. Last August we celebrated 17 amazing years together. Somehow she has put up with me all these years and she has taken on so many additional burdens while I have lived the life of a public servant.

As anyone here with a significant other will tell you, this life isn't easy on your family. There are a lot of doctor's appointments, parent-teacher conferences, and basketball games that are missed because we're here in Jefferson City working for the people. And our spouses have to listen to negative campaign ads and the other criticisms that go hand-in-hand with a life of public service. But just like your spouses, Amanda has taken it all in stride and has been a constant source of strength and support for our family.

Today I want to thank her and all our significant others for their support and their patience. We would not be here without you. Please join me in giving Amanda and all our spouses a well-deserved round of applause.

My five wonderful kids are with me here today as well – Robert, Jillian, Nicholas, Peter, and William. What can I say? They are and will always be my greatest accomplishments.

It's a blessing to have the love of family around me for this incredible moment, but I need to acknowledge a huge void today that cannot be filled. As many of you know, I lost both my father and mother in 2019. They molded me into the man I am today. They gave me the work ethic and the will to fight for what I believe in and these are qualities that have propelled my career in public service. Without question, I would not be here today if not for them. So as today is a moment of pride for me, I know it is also a moment that would make them proud as well.

Today, as I stand here at this dais as your Speaker, I do so with the goal of not only making my family proud but also with the commitment of earning your trust and the trust of the people of Missouri.

I think most of you know from your time working with me as floor leader that my goal has always been, and will always be, to work tirelessly to help you advance your agendas. All of you have issues that mean a great deal to your constituents, and I am committed to working with you to find legislative solutions to these problems.

That goes for both sides of the aisle. I hope my time in the floor leader's office made it clear that I will work with any member from any party. That will not change when I am Speaker. My door will be open and my time will be yours if and when you need me.

And just as I am ready and willing to work with you on the issues you care about, I hope you will keep open minds when it comes to the issues that matter to me.

Education is a topic we discuss in this chamber on a regular basis, and each time we do we take into consideration the perspectives of teachers and administrators about what works and what doesn't. And yes, the actions we take are meant to have what is best for our kids in mind, but to me, we too often fail to consider the viewpoint of actual kids our system of education is meant to serve and not just the perspective of the kids who succeed academically, but also those who struggle to learn in the rigid framework of our system.

Let me tell you about a young man who tried his hardest, but struggled every step of the way in his journey through our education system. From 2nd to 6th grade he was placed in 6 different schools, and the answer to his struggles was medicine for his ADHD rather than a learning plan he could grasp. By the time he reached seventh grade, he was frustrated because he had yet to master something as simple as fractions. It was only when a teacher took extra time to relate to him in a way he could understand that things finally clicked.

This young man was the son of a father in the construction industry, and the teacher brought out a tape measure to help make his point. Suddenly the boy was referring to the markings on the tape measure –

1/4, 7/16, 5/8 – and the teacher helped him realize he in fact did know fractions. He simply hadn't realized it before, and no teacher had been able to help him make that connection.

Unfortunately, this positive moment in the young man's educational career was only one small story of success. Because of his ADHD and other learning challenges, he continued to struggle with his schooling, he was constantly ridiculed and torn down along the way, and he didn't have the benefit of other teachers like his 7th grade instructor, who had the time and dedication to help him succeed. By the time he was 16, he was so frustrated with the system that he dropped out of school entirely.

From there he went on to spend five years learning a skilled trade and became crafty with his hands, but the idea that he wanted to complete his education continued to persist in his mind. This young man decided he would not give up and he ultimately went back to obtain his GED at Harris Stowe State University and then went on to college. Even though this young man's experience in our education system was less than ideal, I think his story is one that is ultimately successful as he went on to become an elected member of this body and today became the Speaker of the House.

But regardless of whatever success I have achieved on a personal level, I can never forget the difficult time I had while in school. I look at the "one size fits all" approach our system too often takes, and I believe it failed me just as it fails countless other students each year.

That's not to say we don't have amazing educators out there. We know our state is blessed with many incredible teachers.

But we also know that not every child works or learns the same way and that our teachers need the time, resources, and flexibility to be able to work with kids on a personal level.

I tell you that we can learn something from the perspective of students like me who struggled within the system. I have often heard folks in the education system say I can't understand what our system of education needs because I'm not a teacher. As a student who struggled, I believe I do have valuable insight on what works and what doesn't, and I believe it is time our system of education listens to these students who have seen firsthand how the system can and should improve.

As I look at our educational landscape I see the need to provide students more opportunities for learning. We can create these opportunities through tools like Education Savings Accounts that will give parents the option to send their kids to the schools that will best serve their needs.

At the same time we look to give kids more educational opportunities, we also must give teachers more opportunities for career growth and advancement.

The coronavirus pandemic has taught an important lesson to parents in every part of our state. Every parent wants to keep their kids safe and healthy, but we have also learned that teachers are more effective as educators in person and that kids must be in school to learn effectively and to have the normal social development that is such an important part of their growth into adulthood.

That is why we must continue to look at ways to give our schools the resources they need to stay open so that the educational experience is not disrupted for thousands of children. We must be innovative as we look for ways to give young people the tools they need to succeed. And that means improving our system of education so that it can help the kids who do not learn in conventional ways. I am committed to working as hard as I can to find a solution that will give our kids a better opportunity for success in the classroom.

I know it won't be easy. But it's one thing to try here and fail on the floor of the House, and it's another to not try at all and fail our kids through a lack of action. I refuse to not try on this issue that means so much to me and even more to our kids.

It's also imperative that we help our kids by making a stronger investment in early childhood development. We know the positive impact of working with kids at a very early age is immense. We also know that by investing in our kids early on in life, we give them a much better chance at succeeding in adulthood.

As Speaker, I want to see us make a stronger commitment to early childhood education. We know if we fail these kids early in life, they may end up on a path that will lead them to incarceration. If we want to better serve the people of our state we must invest in our young people on the front end rather than pay the cost of incarceration on the backend when our system fails them. That is why we must support policies that focus on empowerment rather than imprisonment.

Everyone in this room knows I am standing here before you today because I was blessed to have a mother who was willing to give me life and two parents who adopted me out of foster care to love and raise me as their own child. They were there to support me and to push and encourage me when I needed it. They gave me the stability to stay on the right path. They were there to keep me in line and show me the right way to live my life.

I am thankful each and every day for the life my parents gave me, and I want every child in this state to have similar opportunities. We will look at additional reforms to our foster care system that will help to ensure children don't slip through the cracks, and we will explore the idea of a tax deduction for foster

parents, which can encourage more Missouri families to open their doors and their hearts to our young people in need.

We know we have more than 13,000 kids in our foster care system, and more enter the system every year. We must take every step possible to give each and every one of these kids an open door of opportunity so they can grow into healthy, productive adults.

We also know that here in our state, we have more than 2,500 kids waiting to be adopted. I hope all of you will work with me this session to expand our adoption tax credit so that families who want to adopt a child aren't blocked from doing so simply because of cost. Together we can make adoption a possibility for the many families who may not have the money but certainly have the love and support to give a wonderful life to a young person in need.

These are a few of the things I hope we can make a priority this session, but there are many other issues I know are important to all of us, and we will spend considerable time discussing them as well.

We will again work to cut the regulatory red tape on our businesses and licensed professionals. COVID-19 has been an incredible challenge for our state, but it has also taught us that our businesses are better off with less government and less regulations. We will also continue to promote our continued economic growth by considering common sense legal reforms that will prevent job-killing lawsuits. We will explore ways to make our tax system as fair and as transparent as it can be for taxpayers. We will work to ensure the members of our law enforcement community are properly trained and equipped to protect our communities. As we have done each year, we will continue our strong support for the Second Amendment rights of law-abiding Missourians. We will consider legislation to protect the integrity of our elections system. And we will continue our role in providing oversight over the administration as we work to ensure government is efficient and effective in performing its task of serving the people.

As we tackle these issues, and many others, we will have disagreements. We will need to work together to find compromise, and there may be times that we cannot find the common ground we need to satisfy everyone.

But I can assure you that we will not fail to have the conversation simply because the road to success is a difficult one. And we know this session will be difficult and it will have challenges that go beyond what we normally see in the legislative process. That's because we continue to live with the reality of COVID-19.

This is a session where we will continue to take the appropriate steps to keep one another safe and healthy and to keep our staff and those who do business in the Capitol safe as well, all while ensuring this process is open and transparent for the people of Missouri.

We'll also work directly as a legislative body to address many of the issues that have become topics of discussion as this pandemic has continued. We will look at ways to ensure the freedoms of Missourians aren't compromised needlessly and that local officials properly balance the need to protect the public health with protecting these important freedoms.

I want all of us to work together this session toward implementing reasonable liability protections for our health care workers and businesses, so they can continue to provide the vital services they offer without fear of frivolous lawsuits.

And we will continue to closely scrutinize the response efforts for this pandemic and how the stimulus dollars are spent, so that Missourians know their tax dollars are working in the most efficient and effective way possible.

As we begin the 101st General Assembly, we know we are operating in historic times and that our actions and decisions will make an enormous impact on those we were elected to serve. But those people sent us here to lead, to take on even the toughest challenges, to make the hard decisions that will improve the quality of life for Missourians of all ages. And that is what we will do.

We will rise to the challenge together. We will be responsible and mindful, but we will not shy away from doing the work we were sent here to do.

Thank you again for the trust you have placed in me as your Speaker. I am excited to work with all of you as we begin the 2021 legislative session. May God bless you all and may God bless the great state of Missouri.